A Story About a Girl

- Jessica is a college freshman.
- Growing up, she was athletic and played multiple sports year round.
- Jessica’s schools often had posters up in September for National Childhood Obesity Awareness month.
- Every year her school does BMI screenings and a letter is sent home saying she is overweight. Her concerned mom takes the letter to the pediatrician, who says “She is looking round, maybe it's time to talk about diet and exercise”.
- Jessica starts Weight Watchers with her mom at the age of 15.
Outline

- The Problem: Drawbacks of weight-centric public health programming
- Examples of weight-centric public health messaging & programming
- A weight-neutral paradigm
- Tips for developing weight-neutral health programming
- Examples of weight-neutral health programming
- Challenges to implementing weight-neutral public health initiatives

When we support weight, we don’t necessarily end up supporting health.
THE PROBLEM

Drawbacks of weight-centric public health programming

Weight & Health

• Weight loss is linked to health improvements in the short term but...
  • *We don’t know if health improvements are due to health-supporting behavior changes or the weight loss itself*
    ■ We don’t see health benefits from liposuction
  • Weight regain is likely
  • With dieting, there are risks, including yo-yo dieting, and disordered eating
  • Weight loss promotion unintentionally promotes weight stigma/bias

Weight Bias & Stigma

Weight Bias/Stigma

- Negative attitudes toward a person based on size, such as the stereotype that larger persons are lazy or lacking in willpower.
- These stereotypes can be manifested in different ways, leading to prejudice and discrimination.

Weight Bias & Stigma

- Weight discrimination is associated with:
  - high cholesterol
  - issues with glucose metabolism and inflammation

- Weight dissatisfaction predicts type 2 diabetes risk, controlling for BMI.

“As health care providers, it’s our duty to first do no harm—so we need to educate ourselves about the impacts of weight stigma and work to stop perpetuating it.”

- Christy Harrison, MPH, RDN, CD, host of the Food Psych podcast.

Unintended Harms and Public Health Interventions

- Limited and/or poor quality evidence
- Prevention of one extreme leads to another (boomerang effects)
- Lack of community engagement
- Ignoring root causes
- Higher-income country PHI implementation in a lower- or middle-income country

International Journal of Public Health, 2014, Volume 59, Number 1, Page 3
L. K. Allen-Scott, J. M. Hatfield, L. McIntyre
When public health professionals focus on weight...

- There is blame/shame with a focus on personal responsibilities instead of social inequities such as poverty and food insecurity

- Weight stigma becomes widely accepted
  - Issues with the term “obesity prevention”
  - Bullying

- Avoidance of healthcare for fear of weight messaging from their care providers
  - Requirements to address weight with patients at a certain BMI
  - Pediatricians discussing weight in front of children clients

- Assumptions made about the health patterns of those in larger bodies
- Assumptions made about the health behaviors of those in thin bodies
- Increased risk for risky dieting behaviors and eating disorders
Take a Closer Look at the Evidence

- We all want to be evidence-based practitioners and provide evidence-based public health programming but...
  - We make decisions about care based on epidemiologic studies not supported by long term clinical controlled trials.
  - Studies that show weight loss interventions “work” are always short-term.
  - “Obesogenic” interventions rarely focus on microenvironment (households, workplaces), often focus on physical activity as an outcome

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/does-dieting-work_b_2253565
WEIGHT-CENTRIC PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES

A few examples

Public Health Messages Focus on Weight

“Stop Sugarcoating It, Georgia”, 2012

“Pouring on the Pounds”, 2015
...And Public Health **Assessments** Focus on Weight

![BMI Tool for Schools](image1)

**Children’s BMI Tool for Schools**
The Children’s BMI Tool for Schools is an Excel spreadsheet intended for use by school child-care workers, school nurses, health educators, and public health professionals. The spreadsheet, which is based on BMI data from thousands of children and adolescents in the United States, allows users to input BMI data and generate reports on the prevalence of overweight and obesity among school-aged children.

**Body Mass Index Measurements in Schools**
BMI is a commonly used tool to assess the health status of children and adolescents. In schools, BMI measurements can help identify children who are at risk for obesity and related health problems. BMI measurement data can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based weight management programs.

...And Public Health **Interventions** Focus on Weight

![Diabetes Prevention Program](image2)

**Diabetes Prevention Program**
The Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP) is a lifestyle intervention program designed to prevent type 2 diabetes in adults. The program involves a combination of diet, physical activity, and behavior change counseling. The DPP has been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of developing type 2 diabetes in high-risk individuals.

**Arteriosclerosis, thrombosis, and vascular biology.** 2012;32(9):2077-2090.
...And Public **Health Policies** Focus on Weight

- **Dietary Guidelines**
  - “Prevent and/or reduce overweight and obesity through improved eating and physical activity behaviors”
  - “Control total calorie intake to manage body weight. For people who are overweight or obese, this will mean consuming fewer calories from foods and beverages.”
  - Selected messages for consumers:
    - “Enjoy your food, but eat less”

A WEIGHT-NEUTRAL PARADIGM
Health At Every Size®

Weight Inclusivity

• Accept and respect size diversity.

Health Enhancement

• Improve and equalize access to information and services, and personal practices that improve human well-being.

Respectful Care

• Acknowledge our biases, and work to end weight discrimination, weight stigma, and weight bias.

Health At Every Size®

Eating for Well-Being

• Promote flexible, individualized eating based on hunger, satiety, nutritional needs, and pleasure

Life-Enhancing Movement

• Support physical activities that allow people of all sizes, abilities, and interests to engage in enjoyable movement
TIPS FOR DEVELOPING WEIGHT-NEUTRAL PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES

Tips for successful public health messaging (that minimize weight bias while promoting behavior change and the SDOH)

- Promote fruits/vegetables and physical activity for all bodies
- Avoid terms such as “weight management” and “obesity prevention” in program promotion language
- Promote “adding” instead of “taking away” messages with food
- Use promotional images that represent different body sizes
- Know your audience and tailor messages to their needs
Word Choice is Everything!

**Weight Centric Language**
- Weight loss/lose weight
- Weight management
- Certificate in Weight Management
- Reduce body fat
- Good/bad foods
- Exercise
- Portion Control
- Calorie Control
- Obesity Prevention
- Board Certified Specialist in Obesity and Weight Management

**Weight Neutral Language**
- Weight concerns
- Weight and disordered eating
- Health at Every Size
- Healthy relationship with food and eating
- Intuitive eating/mindful eating
- Make peace with food
- Joyful movement and activity
- Size diversity
- Health Promotion

WEIGHT-NEUTRAL PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES

A few examples
Weight Inclusive Messaging

This Girl Can (https://thisgirlcan.com.au/)

Self Magazine

Weight Inclusive Programming

http://www.nau.edu/ucan
@nauhealthcoach

About UCAN
At UCAN we believe that both physical and mental health are important. Some dietary and physical activity changes may improve physical health, but take a toll on mental health. Our health coaches want to help you find that happy and healthy balance with food and physical activity so that you discover enjoyable and nourishing self-care strategies that support you - mind, body, and soul.

Our philosophies
Nutrition
Physical activity
Body image

Cutting out certain foods or counting calories may feel fun and exciting at first, but most find that restricting calories or certain food groups makes them feel craving, sluggish, and depressed. When you completely eliminate enjoyable foods, then social and mental health suffers.

At UCAN, we promote a more holistic approach to eating and physical activity. We want to support you in incorporating more nourishing, nutrient-dense foods in your meals and snacks. Moreover, we find that it's best not to eliminate foods that bring you joy and pleasure.

We want to help you find that happy and healthy balance where you enjoy more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, and also make room for dessert. All foods fit!
Weight Inclusive Programming

Messages that Focus on Adding

- Make Every Bite Count
- Fill Up on Fruit
- Naturally Sweeten Your Life
- Swap your snack for a piece of whole fruit
- Buy in season to save money
- Satisfy your sweet tooth with frozen fruit

- Make Every Bite Count
- Vary Your Veggies
- Eating Veggies Can Be Easy:
  - Prep veggies right after buying them
  - Stick up on frozen vegetables
  - Mix greens into your smoothies

- Make Every Bite Count
- Choose Water First
- Make Hydration Fun:
  - Choose a water bottle you love
  - Add fruit or cucumber slices
  - Choose carbonated water

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING WEIGHT-NEUTRAL PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES

Barriers to shifting the focus to health over weight, emerging evidence

- Grant dollars centered on interventions that specifically “prevent obesity” and track weight outcomes
- Needing more research for alternative approaches
- A need to educate providers and insurance companies about the negative health consequences of weight-centric approaches
- Developing meaningful assessment tools, beyond BMI
  - Blood pressure, Satter Eating Competence Inventory, Fruit and Vegetable Screeners, Quality of Life Index, Body-Esteem Scale, biochemical markers
References

- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/does-dieting-work_b_2253565
Questions?

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